

# Orientalations

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The magazine for collectors and connoisseurs of Asian art



Plastic, Graphic and Plain: Mino  
Ceramics from the Momoyama Period

Fans Afloat: Samurai Taste in *Yamato-e* Design

Sublime Adornment: *Kirikane*  
in Chinese Buddhist Sculpture

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Forms of Visual Imagination in China

Painted History: The *Tuladana* Ceremony  
in a Mediaeval Nepalese Palace



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VOLUME 34 NUMBER 10 DECEMBER 2003

This month's cover features one of the more unique Oribe wares currently on view at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 'Turning Point: Oribe and the Arts of Sixteenth-Century Japan'. Richard Wilson introduces some of the stylistic innovations in Mino wares of the Momoyama period. By contrast, Patricia Graham's article discusses a specific decorative motif, fans floating in water, which developed from two separate themes common in Japanese art, and came to be used on a variety of objects, including screens, lacquerware and textiles. Helmut Brinker shows how embellishment of Chinese Buddhist sculptures with cut gold leaf was used to convey notions of sacredness and purity. Gautama Vajracharya examines a Nepalese painting from the exhibition 'Himalayas: An Aesthetic Adventure' which provides a fascinating glimpse of the enactment of a royal ceremony. Also included in this issue are reports from the autumn auctions in Hong Kong and New York, and Dianne McGowan's commentary on the role museums play in presenting cultural objects to Western audiences.

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Cover: Dish with lid and view of interior  
Japan. Momoyama period, early 17th century  
Mino ware, Oribe type, glazed stoneware  
Height 7.2 cm, diameter 16.7 cm  
Private collection, Tokyo

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# Painted History: The *Tuladana* Ceremony in a Mediaeval Nepalese Palace

Gautama V. Vajracharya

Within the last few decades several significant Nepalese paintings on cotton, known to native speakers as *paubha*, have come to light. Among them is a magnificent 17th century example in the collection of the Institut d'Etudes Indiennes at the Collège de France, Paris (Fig. 1). It depicts an elaborate donation ritual called *tuladana* ('weighing gift') being performed by the Malla royal family of Kathmandu. The painting, by an unknown artist, shows the ritual taking place in front of the large terraced temple of Taleju, the powerful tutelary deity of the Malla kings. Since the temple is located in the northern section of Hanuman Dhoka, an old Malla palace, the monuments of that section are also shown here in the foreground and background.

This important painting was not available to me when I wrote a book on the palace (Vajracharya, 1975). It appeared on the European market around 1977 when Pratapaditya Pal was about to finish the painting volume of *The Arts of Nepal* (Pal, 1978). Realizing the great significance of this *paubha*, Pal included a preliminary study of the work as an appendix to his monograph (p. 157). Now, the exhibition 'Himalayas: An Aesthetic Adventure', which opened at The Art Institute of Chicago and is currently showing at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution (until 11 January 2004) has provided the general public with the opportunity to view this and many other valuable Tibetan works of art for the first time. (Pal presents a further study of the painting in his catalogue to the exhibition; see Pal, 2003, p. 80; my own analysis of the painting's epigraph is included in the appendix, p. 282).

At the symposium in Chicago which accompanied the exhibition, Anne Vergati, an anthropologist, art historian and the prior owner of the painting, delivered a paper explaining the similarities and differences between this and other Nepalese works. In my view, however, this painting deserves special attention for different reasons. Of primary significance is the fact that it explains how the *tuladana* ritual is associated with both the goddess Taleju and the heavenly gateway. Remarkably, it captures time and space by representing a scene as it actually happened in the palace, a refreshing approach almost unknown to Nepalese artistic tradition. The representation of the Malla palace also provides us with an opportunity to study the original appearance of the monuments and presents an excellent example of the stylistic dilemma that the artist must have experienced when he tried to capture the reality of space and time without abandoning stylistic norms.

In India and Nepal during the mediaeval period, and undoubtedly even in ancient times, *tuladana* was performed both for permission to enter heaven and for the health and longevity

of a family member, usually a child. In this ritual the child was weighed against valuable objects such as silver and gold, which were then distributed to *brahmins* and other religious figures. Since great expense was entailed, it eventually became exclusively a royal ritual. In the painting, Pratapa Malla (r. 1641-74), the flamboyant Malla king of Kathmandu, is shown weighing Prince Chakravartindra Malla, who was suffering from a life-threatening disease. In order to express his affection for his dying son, the king abdicated and enthroned the young prince. As a matter of fact, this ritual was performed after the prince ascended the throne. In the inscription he is given the titles of Maharajadhiraja (King of Kings) and Nepaleshvara (King of Nepal). Unfortunately the young prince died of his illness in the lifetime of his loving father. However, due to the incurable nature of the disease, his death was not entirely unexpected.

The ceremony took place in 1664 in front of the main door of the temple. For the performance of this ritual, two massive stone pillars crowned by lotus-like flower buds were erected, and a sturdy bar placed horizontally connected them. A huge balance was hooked to the middle of the bar to weigh the young prince against precious metal and gems. In the painting the prince is shown seated on one of the scales, of throne-like, rectangular shape, while the other scale, of similar appearance, is being heaped with precious objects (Fig. 1a).

The massive structure designed to support the balance is known as a *torana* (or *tolana*) in Sanskrit. Literally, it means 'weighing' or 'a balance'. However, for our study, it is important to note that in the history of ancient Indian architecture the same word is also used for a gateway. Highly developed elaborate stone gateways first appeared around the Buddhist stupas in Bharhut and Sanchi during the 2nd and 1st century BCE. Art historians have tended to express their views about the origin and significance of the structure without giving sufficient attention to the etymology of the term and the original appearance of simple wooden *toranas* represented on the stone railings of the same stupas. Despite the fact that the Paris painting belongs to a much later period, it is very informative respecting this subject, particularly because the inscribed stone structure, which once held the balance for the performance of *tuladana*, is still standing in front of the Taleju temple (Vajracharya, 1975, pp. 218-20). The balance was removed from the stand, most likely immediately after the ceremony was over. Since then the stone structure has been turned into a gateway to the temple. This phenomenon explains why in Sanskrit *torana* implies both the balance and gateway.

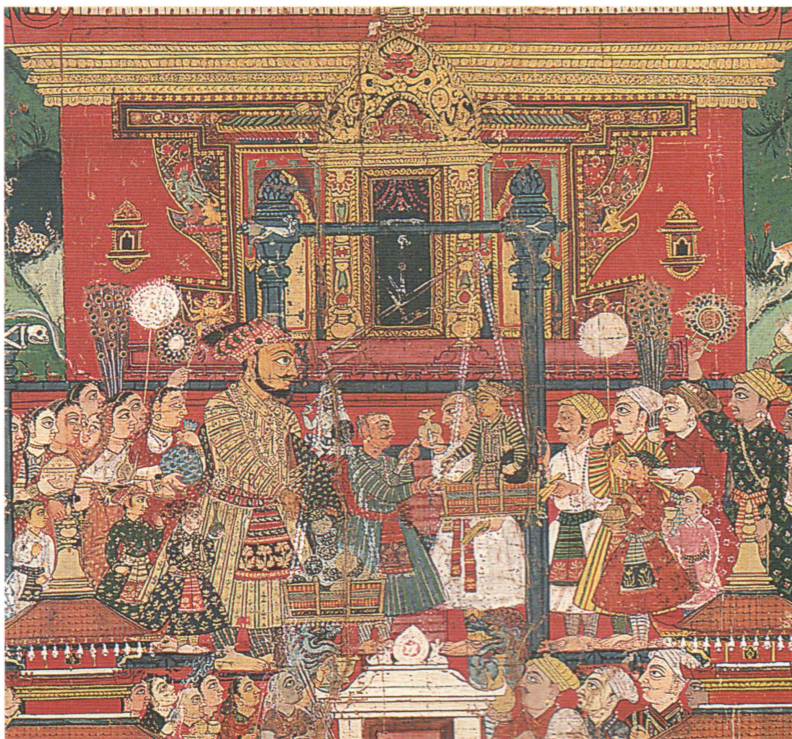
Further information about the connection between *torana* and *tuladana* derives from Rajasthan in India, where the *tu-*

(Fig. 1) *Royals Perform the Tuladana Ceremony at the Taleju Temple*  
Nepal, 1664  
Colour and gold on cotton  
Height 170 cm, width 120 cm  
Institut d'Etudes Indiennes, Collège de France, Paris  
Bequest of A. Vergati, IEI CF 50

*ladana* ritual was known to the Rajput kings and their subjects as *toran* or *torana*. For this ritual it was mandatory to erect a gateway as a stand for the balance. Rajasthan is dotted with such monuments (see *Mewar Encyclopedia*, [www.mewarindia.com](http://www.mewarindia.com)). In mediaeval Nepalese inscriptions, the goddess Taleju is sometimes associated with a balance and at other times with an entrance. Her Sanskrit name is Tulaja ('born out of a balance'). In Newari she is also known as Talju or Talaju, which literally means 'a balance'. The Hindi word *taraju* ('a balance') is cognate with these Newari names. The goddess is often identified in India and Nepal with Mahishamardini. Therefore, iconographically, she is represented as a multi-armed Hindu goddess engaged in killing the water-buffalo demon. But in Nepal she is also represented by a *torana*. One of the best examples of such representations is seen in the Paris painting. The diminutive golden *torana* shown under the light green tree is still extant and in the same location. We know for certain that this *torana* represents the goddess Taleju because animal sacrifices are still performed in front of this small shrine in honour of the goddess. Such sacrifices are messy and as the sacrificial animals include water buffaloes, a large area is required to carry them out. For this reason they are not performed in front of the main door of the Taleju temple. Furthermore, Pratapa Malla's metal inscription attached to the main door designates the goddess as *torana* (Vajracharya, 1975, p. 228). This designation could be partially poetic, but certainly not without symbolic significance.

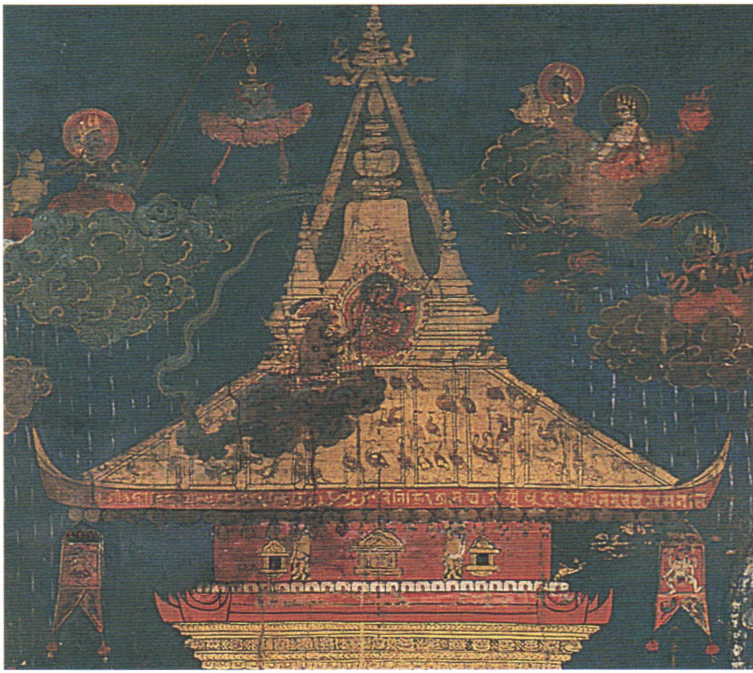
This discussion clearly reveals that both Sanskrit literature and Newar tradition do not necessarily differentiate a balance from the multi-purpose gateway. There is a fascination in South Asia with the multi-purpose object, be it an architectural element, item of furniture or a utensil. Even these days in the villages and towns of India and Nepal, it is common to see the horizontal upper beam or lintel of the gateway to a merchant's courtyard furnished with a large hook for hanging a balance. According to Indian architectural terminology a lintel is designated *tula*, meaning 'balance' (*Matsyapurana*, 205.5).

Furthermore, the Rajput kings of Rajasthan preferred to perform this ritual not within their kingdom but in Haradwar, the gate to heaven and the region where the sacred river Ganga descends from the Himalayas (*Mewar Encyclopedia*, [www.mewarindia.com](http://www.mewarindia.com)). As I have mentioned in other works, the source of water, including rain, is the heavenly gate. But this gate is not open all the time; in fact, for the security of heaven, it is closed and locked. Only when the gods are convinced that the person trying to enter is qualified to be in heaven do they remove the horizontal bolt and allow entry (Vajracharya, 2003, forthcoming). The gate is also equipped with a balance, on which the gods weigh the newcomer before they permit him to enter (*Shatapathabrahmana*, 11.2.7.33). The concept of weighing a person's virtue was in vogue not only in religious ritual but also in the judicial system of ancient India. The *Vishnudharmottarapurana* 3.328.27-42 and several other texts describe in detail how to weigh a suspect to determine whether he is a criminal or a virtuous person. Thus it becomes evident that the *tuladana* was performed not only for the restoration of health but also for permission to enter heaven. This seems to be a reason that the Malla kings often performed *tuladana* in front of the Taleju temple. Thus in the style of continuous narration the young prince is shown twice more in the painting to describe his journey to heaven. We see him a second time in the middle of the stylized cloud on the right of the Taleju temple. The third time, he appears on the uppermost roof of the temple in front of a small oval shrine of a deity, who could be none other than the goddess Taleju herself, here represented iconographically (Fig. 1b). Although this scene is badly damaged, one can decipher the silhouette of the prince seated on a throne, which is actually the same rectangular scale on which he was weighed during the ritual. Evidently the highest heaven is situated at the uppermost section of the temple, whereas the heavenly gate *torana* equipped with a balance is located in front of the main door of the temple. Thus the *tuladana* ceremony is actually the ritual enactment of the what was expected to take place after death.



(Fig. 1a) Detail of Figure 1 showing the *tuladana* ceremony





(Fig. 1b) Detail of Figure 1 showing Prince Chakravartindra Malla greeting the goddess Taleju

The foreground of the painting depicts a palatial courtyard known to mediaeval writers as Trishul Ribi ('Trident Courtyard') (Vajracharya, 1975, pp. 114-15). Of two stone pillars in the courtyard, one is crowned by a white lion, the animal vehicle of the goddess Taleju, the other by the statue of Pratapa Malla and his two sons. Both these pillars are the contribution of Pratapa Malla, who is mainly responsible for the expansion and embellishment of the palace. Currently, however, the courtyard contains three stone pillars. Since the third was erected by Parthivendra Malla in 1682, almost two decades later, one cannot expect to see it in this painting. The courtyard is occupied by elephants, horses and their riders. The white horse, well equipped with a colourful saddle but without a rider, belongs to the goddess Taleju, and is therefore shown prominently in the foreground. Even now, following the ancient custom, a horse is kept at the temple and allowed to roam the grounds.

In the same courtyard, flanked by two groups of musicians playing a variety of trumpets and drums is a small structure with a white dome and golden finial. This is the *agnisala*, a shrine for fire worship, built by King Lakshinarasimha Malla in 1637 (Vajracharya, 1975, p. 114). The painting shows a priest and attendants engaged in fire sacrifice, originally a Vedic ritual.

Several other groups of musicians, and more elephants, are depicted on the upper levels of the terrace, where we also meet royal attendants and other palace workers moving hastily from one place to another carrying a variety of objects. On the variegated stairway, which is depicted immediately behind the lion-pillar, a worker carries a massive golden water jar and energetically climbs the stairs (Fig. 1c). This figure is also helpful for stylistic study, which we will discuss shortly. Just above him another person holds a large bag, perhaps waiting for someone to transfer it to. On both sides of the stairway more activities are taking place. Some carry trays, others exchange messages. Almost in the middle of the terrace, partially blocked by the statues of Pratapa Malla and his sons, stands a small white gateway decorated with huge, stylized eyes and a golden water jar. Like many other monuments of the palace, the gateway has survived, and even today its appearance is almost

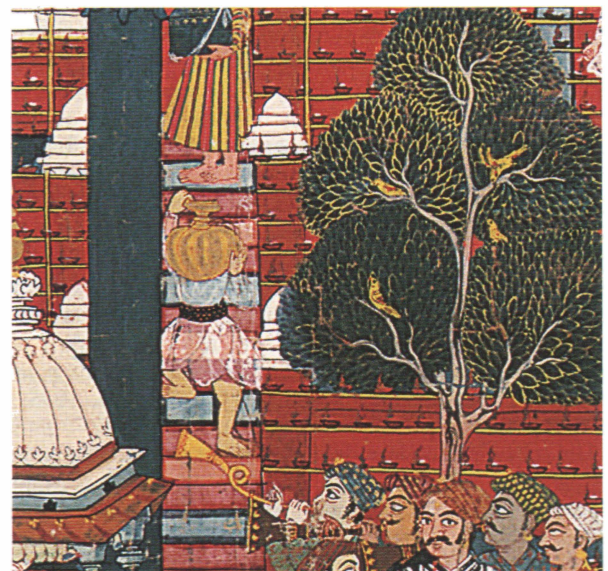
exactly as shown in the painting. The significance of the gateway and its representation here is based on the fact that more than likely it was built in imitation of *madhyalakhu*, the middle gate of ancient Nepalese palaces about which we know only from textual sources.

The main event of the ritual is taking place behind this gate. Surrounded by the members of the royal family and attendants, Pratapa Malla, who is shown in hierarchical proportion, stands facing Prince Chakravartindra Malla, who is being weighed on the scale. The bearded king, attired in a turban, striped *jama* and colourful sash in Mughal/Rajput fashion, holds a blue money-bag from which he generously pours silver and gold coins onto the other scale. Interestingly, although the offering already far outweighs the little prince, the king appears to be still adding to the pile.

This scene is very close to an earlier Mughal masterpiece, painted around 1615, depicting a similar subject, Emperor Jahangir weighing prince Khurram (Fig. 2). Although the *tuladana* is a Hindu ritual, the Mughal Emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605), who admired Hindu culture, adopted it as one of the annual events at his palace. The ritual continued even in Jahangir's time (r. 1605-27) and contemporaneous authors often describe the grandeur of the ceremony. Our artist has captured the same grandeur in this Nepalese version of *tuladana*.

This does not mean that the Malla king performed the ceremony in imitation of the Mughal. In fact there is earlier textual evidence of the popularity of this custom in ancient Nepal. However, it is true that *tuladana* became more popular after the Mughal emperors took an interest in it. A few decades later another Malla king performed the same ceremony in front of the Taleju temple (Vajracharya, 1975, pp. 258-59).

In the painting still other events closely associated with the ceremony are taking place immediately behind the balance (see Fig. 1a). A royal priest dressed in white *jama* and scarlet sash holds a golden pot and ritually pours water on the right hand of a *brahmin* who wears green *jama* and holds a manuscript in his left hand. According to the ancient rite of gift-giving, which is recorded both in text and sculptures, the donor pours water from a pot and the recipient stretches out his hand to receive the water



(Fig. 1c) Detail of Figure 1 showing a palace worker





(Fig. 1d) Detail of Figure 1 showing Garuda devouring a serpent

in his palm. This rite is accompanied by a prescribed dialogue in which the donor tells the recipient what he is granting him. The latter verbally accepts the donation and expresses his gratitude to the donor. One of the earliest representations of this ritual is found in the Buddhist sculpture of Bharhut, in which Prince Vishvantara is shown pouring water into the hand of a *brahmin* who received a white elephant from the prince (see A.K. Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, New York, 1965, fig. 47). In our case the royal priest is acting on behalf of King Pratapa Malla.

In the painting the Taleju temple has three superimposed levels of golden roofs, all inhabited by pigeons and colourful exotic birds. Both the terraces and the outer wall of the main temple are painted bright red to indicate the colour of the bricks used for the structures. The main temple is surrounded by smaller shrines with two levels of roofs. These shrines shelter various anthropomorphic deities called *ayudhapurusas* ('attributes in human form'). They symbolize the multiple attributes held by the main goddess Taleju, when she is represented iconographically.

Although the Taleju temple dominates the entire picture, on closer examination the viewer can detect many other monuments of the palace. To the left of the temple, for example, is a tank with a pole in the middle. The square brick terraces of the tank are indicated by scarlet and yellowish-red borders, and water is rendered dark green. The pole is crowned by a serpent's hood; hence the entire pole symbolizes the serpent, and the tank is designated in contemporaneous writing as *nagaya pukhu* ('serpent's tank'). With the display of this monument, the artist has symbolically represented an important aspect of a mediaeval Nepalese palace. The serpent's tank is a main feature of the palatial garden known to the Newars as *bhandarkhal* ('treasure garden'). This interesting name is derived from the fact that royal gardens of the mediaeval period were more than gardens: they housed subterranean structures, where valuable royal possessions were kept hidden, protected by the watchful serpent in a nearby tank. Descriptions of such treasure gardens are found not only in Nepalese documents but also in Sanskrit texts dealing with royal architecture. (I have dealt with this in more detail in my book on the palace; see Vajracharya, 1975, pp. 122-28).

Almost exactly in the same place, but on the other side of the Taleju temple, facing the airborne prince, is a fountain shown against a red background. It was built in 1652 by King Pratapa Malla and designated in his inscription as *Luhiti* ('Golden Fountain'). Its spout is designed after the head of a mythical animal. The real spout of the fountain, which still

exists in the palace, is done in repoussé technique and sumptuously decorated with many varieties of aquatic animals, seemingly streaming down together with the current of the water. The human figure seated immediately below the fountain is the mythical king Bhagiratha, who brought the heavenly river down to earth. His presence is symbolic of this famous descent.

The pleasing pictorial balance created by the serpent's tank and golden fountain is further enhanced by the representation of twin *granthakuta*-style temples flanking the main Taleju temple. Such temples are characterized by the combination of Newar and Nagara-style architecture. Unfortunately, neither of these temples appears the same today. But from early documents, written before the 1934 earthquake which devastated Kathmandu, we know that they were more than three storeys high, and known as Mahendreshvara temple, on the left, and Bhandarkhal Shiva on the right. The same documents inform us that the earthquake did not damage the Taleju temple.

Above the temple in the painting many Hindu divinities including *dikpalas* ('divinities presiding over eight directions') are shown hovering in the sky on their respective animal vehicles, which are emerging from the clouds. A detailed description of all these divinities cannot be provided here. But it is important to note how the artist visualized various atmospheric phenomena. Against the dark blue sky he describes colourful rainbows, serpentine lightning, dragons and a figure of the mythical bird Garuda fighting with a serpent and eventually devouring it. Although the figures of the bird and serpent are rendered in a diminutive scale, they can be detected at the upper border on the right (Fig. 1d). This scene immediately reminds us of the tympanum of Newar architecture – compare it with the tympanum of the main entrance of the Taleju temple and other shrine in the painting. In another article I studied the scene in detail, since it explains how the iconography of the tympanum is symbolically related to atmospheric phenomena (Gautama V. Vajracharya, 'Meet the Genies from Kathmandu', in a forthcoming Marg Publication edited by Pratapaditya Pal). As we discussed earlier, it is this symbolism which helps us understand the association of the *tuladana* ceremony and Taleju with the gate of heaven.

Although the subject of the painting resembles the earlier Mughal portrayal of Emperor Jahangir weighing Prince Khurram, this painting is rendered in a combination of Newar, Rajput and Mughal style. Newar style is mainly visible in the physiognomy, red background and architectural elements. The emphasis on full profile is entirely a Rajput contribution and the artist's attempt to differentiate human figures and depict a group of people as if they are standing on slanting ground may be considered Mughal influence.

It was previously believed that such elements arrived in Nepal not directly from the Mughal atelier but through the works of Rajput artists who admired contemporaneous Mughal painting and incorporated a variety of its artistic elements into their own work. This view is still basically correct; however, in light of the discovery of this painting, it seems likely that some Kathmandu artists were directly acquainted with Mughal works. The main section of our painting is so similar to the Jahangir masterpiece that the Nepalese artist must have seen the original – or a faithful copy (see Fig. 1a). As in the painting of Jahangir, the monarch stands in front of the balance facing the crown prince seated on the scale. Despite the fact that in Nepalese painting, the monarch is shown in hierarchical proportion and this unnaturalistic treatment is avoided in Mughal work, in both these examples the sovereigns are shown almost in the centre surrounded by important people of the palace. In



addition, the artists of both these paintings have given a great deal of attention to the display of imposing pomp and grandeur. Perhaps even more undeniable evidence for the Mughal influence derives from the artist's interest in capturing time and space in his work. This concept is almost unknown in the history of Nepalese art. As in other mainstream South Asian art, Nepalese artistic tradition is closely associated with the belief that a work has the power either to cause disaster or fulfil the wish of a viewer. In accordance with this belief, in which cause and effect are reversed, the sight of an artwork portraying, for example, a deity, or an emaciated human figure, is the cause and what happens in the future is the effect (Vajracharya, 2003, pp. 1-24). An artistic representation should therefore be both beautiful and devoid of inauspicious elements. In accordance with this theory, art should not be regarded simply as an imitation of the real world. Mughal art, on the other hand, is not associated with any religious beliefs and mainly focuses on recording historically significant glorious moments or the beauty of Nature.

Admittedly, some historical events associated with religious ceremony are occasionally depicted in Nepalese paintings; but they are always treated insignificantly at the bottom of the



(Fig. 2) Emperor Jahangir Weighs Prince Khurram  
Mughal, c. 1610-15  
Opaque watercolour on paper  
Height 44.2 cm, width 29.7 cm  
The Trustees of the British Museum, Bequest of  
P.C. Manuk Esq. and Miss G.M. Coles, through  
the National Arts Collection Fund (1948.10-9069)

painting in a tiny horizontal strip in which the human figures are correspondingly small. In the 15th century, two innovative artists, Adyayaraja Puna and Udayaram Puna successfully abandoned this traditional approach and created a splendid monumental painting in which not only is an historical event now the principal subject but the human participants are prominent portrait figures. Daringly, it would seem, it is the deities who now play a limited role. (see fig. 1, Gautama V. Vajracharya, 'Threefold Intimacy: The Recent Discovery of an Outstanding Nepalese Portrait Painting', in *Orientations*, April 2003, pp. 40-45). Following these two great artists, however, no other Nepalese made a similar attempt until the anonymous creator of the Paris painting. Refreshingly, he too captured a real event, the unfolding of the *tuladana* ceremony as it took place in the northern section of the old Hanuman Dhoka Palace in 1664.

Perhaps even more fascinating is that despite his familiarity with the Mughal concept of recording historical events realistically, our artist did not abandon the prevalent stylistic norms of his time. Demonstrating close ties with the Rajput style, the artist rendered almost all human figures including sculptural representations of Pratapa Malla and his sons in full profile instead of a variety of ways as required. Thus in the painting the statues of the Malla king and princes on the pillar, as well as the lion, are shown facing left. In reality these statues are facing toward the Taleju temple and the royal personages joining both hands in the *namaskara* gesture in order to express their devotion to the goddess. It is only because the conventions of Newar and Rajput painting prevented the artist from showing the back of the figures that he adopted an unrealistic pose. But turning them sideways denies the devout supplicants the temple of the goddess and her image, to which they should offer their salutations. Thus the greeting gesture of the devotees as depicted here appears very odd. The artist was undoubtedly conscious of this, and perhaps not happy with it, because the painting reveals that he was quite capable of presenting human figures naturalistically. When he rendered the tiny figure of a palace worker climbing the lofty staircases with a large water pot, our artist abandoned the expected full profile and demonstrated his ability to depict the figure from behind as it is meant to be seen (Fig. 2). If he had made such a drastic change in a crucial section of his work, it would almost certainly have been unacceptable to his audience. The artist appears to have been quite aware of this and wisely chose the insignificant figure to show his artistic ability; but silently accepted the conventional style when he painted the royal images on the pillar.

Gautama V. Vajracharya is a specialist in Sanskrit and art history at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

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